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Chinoiseries for the Qing: A French Gift of Tapestries to the Qianlong Emperor

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Abstract

In 1766 a set of chinoiserie tapestries produced by the Beauvais manufactory was presented to the Qianlong emperor on behalf of the French administration. Chinoiserie has conventionally been understood as a frivolous or superficial European response to China's material culture; viewed from this perspective, the tapestries would seem to be a most unsuitable gift for the emperor. Yet Qianlong not only received the hangings, but he had a European-style palace built to house them. This article examines the circumstances surrounding the French offering, the Chinese priests who brought the gift from France to Beijing, and the meanings the tapestries could communicate in a diplomatic context marked not by official contact between the French and the Qing, but through an informal diplomacy negotiated through objects.

Keywords

French-Qing international relations – diplomatic gifts – Henri-Léonard Bertin – Qianlong emperor – chinoiserie – tapestry

Introduction

In 1765, two Chinese converts to Catholicism returned to their homeland after over ten years in France. Gao Ren (1732-after 1795?) and Yang Zhide

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(1733-1798?), better known by their Christian names Aloys (Louis) Ko and Étienne Yang, departed laden with gifts given to them by the French minister, Henri-Léonard Bertin (1720-1792), and intended for the Qianlong emperor and his entourage.[1] Most intriguing among the presents was a set of six Beauvais tapestries known as the *tenture chinoise* or Chinese hangings (Fig. 1). Designed in the early 1740s by the master of the French rococo, François Boucher, the *tenture chinoise* features idyllic imaginings, on a grand scale, of vaguely Chinese figures relaxing outdoors, eating, fishing, dancing and buying goods. Described by one scholar as representing a "Cloud-Cuckoo China . . . flippant, decorative and deft," these tapestries are frequently held up as exemplars of chinoiserie, the eighteenth-century European practice of appropriating and adapting Chinese and Japanese motifs in textiles, furniture, architecture, porcelain and painting.[2] Chinoiserie has been generally understood to be a trivializing or deprecating European response to Asia and its cultural productions; viewed through this optic, the *tenture chinoise* would seem to be a most inappropriate diplomatic gift. And yet, not only were the tapestries presented to Qianlong, but he in turn had a European-style palace purpose built to house them at his garden complex at Yuanming Yuan outside Beijing (Fig. 2). There the *tenture chinoise* remained until the looting of Yuanming Yuan by Franco-British troops in 1860 and the return of at least one of the tapestries, *The Chinese Fair*, to France as the spoils of war. The tapestry was destroyed by fire in 1871; a print published of it in 1861 is the sole confirmed visual record of the set sent to China (Fig. 1).[3]

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1 Henri Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois du XVIII[ème] siècle à l'école des physiocrates français," *Bulletin de l'Université l'Aurore* (1949): 154-157; Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine, 1552-1773* (San Francisco, 1976), 920-922 (Yang) and 923-25 (Kao, known as Ko); and Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Rome and Paris, 1973), no. 425 (Kao) and no. 911 (Yang).

2 Michael Levey, *Painting and Sculpture in France, 1700-1789* (New Haven and London, 1993), 164.

3 Paul Leroy, "Sur les relations artistiques entre la France et la Chine aux XVII[e] et XVIII[e] siècles," *Réunion des Sociétés des beaux arts des départements* (1900): 420. The same author relates that another of the series was brought from China after 1860 by an English colonel. The latter may be a version of the *Chinese Garden* brought to the United States in 1947 but whose current location is unknown. See Pascal-François Bertrand, "La seconde 'Tenture chinoise' tissé à Beauvais et Aubusson. Relations entre Oudry, Boucher et Dumons," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 116 (1990): 177, 182, n. 35. The fate of the other tapestries is unknown. One was reported to be in the Nanjing Museum, but I have not been able to locate it. See Hendrik Budde, Christoph Müller-Hofstede and Gereon Sievernich, *Europa und die Kaiser von China* (Frankfurt am

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FIGURE 1 *The Chinese Fair*, wood engraving, 1861, after a Beauvais tapestry woven c. 1759, looted from Yuanming Yuan in 1860 and now presumed destroyed, reproduced in *L'art pour tous: encyclopédie de l'art industriel et décoratif*, no. 16 (August 31, 1861), 63.

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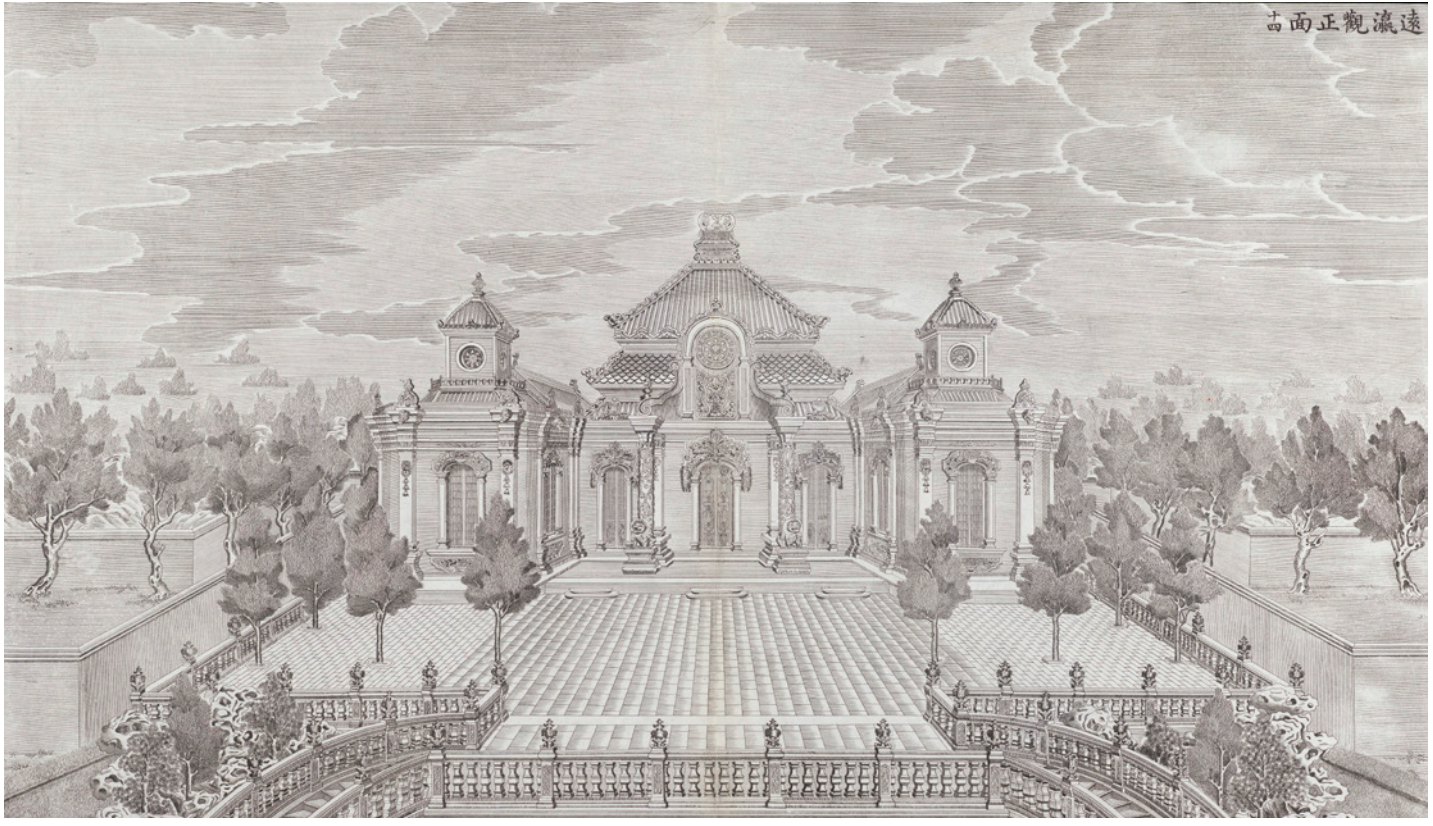

FIGURE 2 *Ilantai, Yuanyingguan zhengmian* (*Observatory of Distant Oceans*), engraving, plate 14 of *Xiyanglou shuifa tu* (*Pictures of the European Palaces and Waterworks*), 1783-86.
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In the eighteenth century as now, diplomacy and its rituals of the gift were sensitive matters. The *tenture chinoise* was not, however, an official offering from one sovereign to another. Indeed Bertin had given strict instructions that the gift not be understood as such.[4] Instead the tapestries and Bertin's plans for their delivery were designed to circumvent diplomatic ceremonial and the questions of protocol and precedence that a formal embassy would inevitably raise and that famously bedeviled the British ambassador Lord George Macartney's audience with the Qianlong emperor in 1793. In eighteenth-century Europe, diplomatic ritual was correlated with the relative positions of states; in Qing China, it was predicated on the recognition of imperial superiority.[5] Neither the French king, who assumed precedence over his eighteenth-century European peers, nor the Qing emperor could officially accept the other on equal terms. Bertin's gifts were thus a vehicle of informal diplomacy, a means by which the two states could communicate with each other through unofficial channels. In some respects, Bertin's plan represented a reprise or continuation of Louis XIV's dispatch of Jesuit mathematicians to the Qing court in 1685 and the Kangxi emperor's reciprocal envoy of gifts to the French king via Jesuits returning to France.[6] Neither, though, was an official embassy.

Main, 1985), 353. Of the extant versions of *The Chinese Fair*, the closest in appearance to the tapestry sent to China is in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-1956-62.

4 Henri-Léonard Bertin to Aloys Ko and Étienne Yang, December 31, 1766, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Paris (hereafter cited as BI), Ms. 1521, f. 10r. Bertin likely also wanted to protect himself. The ministry of foreign affairs was responsible for diplomatic gifts—and until 1770 the foreign minister was Bertin's nemesis, the duc de Choiseul—but the king approved Bertin's actions. Such unofficial maneuvers were typical of the ancien regime administration.

5 On Europe see William Roosen, "Early Modern Diplomatic Ceremonial: A Systems Approach," *Journal of Modern History* 52 (1980): 458-464. For an overview of Qing-European diplomacy, see John L. Cranmer-Byng and John E. Wills, Jr., "Trade and Diplomacy with Maritime Europe 1644-c. 1800," in *China and Maritime Europe, 1500-1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy and Missions*, ed. John E. Wills, Jr. (Cambridge, 2011), 183-254. On the Macartney embassy see James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London, 1995).

6 On Louis XIV's envoy, see Catherine Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority During the Kangxi Reign (1662-1722)* (Oxford and New York, 2012), 102-119, and Isabelle Landry-Deron, "Les mathématiciens envoyés en Chine par Louis XIV en 1685," *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 55 (2001): 423-463. For Kangxi's gifts, sent with the Jesuit Jean De Fontenay in 1700, see Monique Cohen, "A Point of History: The Chinese Books Presented to the National Library in Paris by Joachim Bouvet, S.J. in 1697," *Chinese Culture* 31 (1990): 39-48, here 48, n. 17. As Cohen argues, an earlier gift of books brought from Beijing by

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For Bertin, working in the wake of French defeat in the Seven Years' War, the gifts to Qianlong and his court were meant to secure economic advantages, intelligence and information for the French. Bertin explicitly intended them to stimulate Chinese appetites for French goods and to thus begin to rectify trade imbalances between France and China and make up for French losses in India. He also hoped the gifts would persuade Qing officials to participate in the mutual sharing of scientific information and artistic technologies he envisioned. A professed Enlightenment universalist, Bertin optimistically anticipated that the presents and the dialogue they initiated might even lead to the exchange of artisans between the two countries.[7] He was also, however, a pragmatist, and his repeatedly stated belief in a universal humanity was inflected by European economic competition, particularly between France and England, in an era of global trade, and by contemporary geopolitical concerns. During the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774, for instance, Bertin hoped to enlist Ko and Yang's help in securing an informal alliance between the Qing and the French to forestall Russian expansionism and facilitate the exchange of military information.[8]

These were ambitious goals, and one can be certain that the selection of the *tenture chinoise* was carefully deliberated. But how can we reconcile the themes of the tapestries with the aims of the gift? In the art historical literature thus far, archival documentation of this gift has not been investigated in any detail, and the presentation of the hangings to the emperor has implicitly been viewed as a somewhat baffling instance of cultural incomprehension.[9]

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the priest Joachim Bouvet was likely not an imperial offering though it was understood as such by French officials.

7 Henri-Léonard Bertin to Pierre Poivre, Versailles, December 31, 1766, reprinted in Leroy, "Sur les relations," 424.

8 Bertin to Ko and Yang, January 1, 1774, BI, Ms. 1522, f. 17-39, see also an earlier draft of the letter, written at some point in 1773, which is more urgent in tone, BI, Ms. 1522, f. 3-14; Gwynne Lewis, "Henri-Léonard Bertin and the Fate of the Bourbon Monarchy: The 'Chinese' Connection," in *Enlightenment and Revolution: Essays in Honour of Norman Hampson*, ed. Malcolm Crook, William Doyle and Alan Forrest (Aldershot, 2004), 83-84.

9 See, for example, Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (New York, 1973), 93, and Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (New York, 1977), 73. Impey characterizes the choice of gift as "astonishing." Early twentieth-century sinologists and Jesuit historians published a wealth of archival documentation on Bertin, Ko, Yang and the exchanges that resulted from their meeting, but these documents have only recently come to the attention of historians and art historians. One exception is Denys Sutton's brief discussion of the *tenture chinoise* in *François Boucher* (Tokyo, 1982), 231-232.

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Like the twentieth-century understanding of chinoiserie on which it relies, such an interpretation rests on the assumption that exoticism can only be the result of a superficial or "flippant" interest in the cultures depicted, and that it inherently excludes more ambivalent, dynamic or informed responses to them.[10] This modern conceptualization of exoticism is at odds with the eighteenth-century choice of the *tenture chinoise* as a vehicle of indirect diplomacy. Given the importance of the gift, it seems likely that Bertin's selection of the tapestries was driven less by ignorance and more by his assumption of an underlying compatibility between the eighteenth-century Chinese and French courts. In his study of eighteenth-century French and Qing court cultures, Greg Thomas has compellingly argued that French and Chinese elites of this period appreciated their cultural differences in some dimensions only by recognizing similarity in others. Beneath or alongside exotic difference lay a recognition of compatibility and equivalence, a sense of the two cultures as civilizational equals.[11]

The selection of tapestry as a gift for the emperor is consistent with this assumed commonality. In scale and technique, tapestries represented the pinnacle of French luxury production, and they exemplified magnificence, the dazzling display that was the very substance of status in eighteenth-century Europe. They were thus the French administration's diplomatic gifts of choice to both European and extra-European sovereigns, including Algerian and Guinean dignitaries.[12] Part of their attraction must have been the spectacle of the successive unfurling of multiple large tapestries during their presentation

10 Jonathan Hay, "Toward a Theory of the Intercultural," *RES* 35 (Spring 1999): 6; Nebahat Avcioğlu, *'Turquerie' and the Politics of Representation, 1728-1876* (Farnham and Burlington, 2011), 4-8.

11 Greg M. Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions between Chinese and European Palace Cultures," *Art History* 32 (2009): 117. See also Katie Scott, "Playing Games with Otherness: Watteau's Chinese Cabinet at the Château de La Muette," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 66 (2003): 189-247, esp. 224, and Greg M. Thomas, "The Looting of Yuanming Yuan and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*: *A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/autumn08/93-the-looting-of-yuanming-and-the-translation-of-chinese-art-in-europe (accessed July 10, 2014).

12 Wolfgang Brassat, *Tapisserien und Politik: Funktionen, Kontexte und Rezeption eines repräsentativen Mediums* (Berlin, 1992), 88-89; Jean Coural and Chantal Gastinel-Coural, *Beauvais manufacture nationale de tapisserie* (Paris, 1992), 13. From 1737, the Beauvais factory was to supply the French ministry of foreign affairs with two complete sets of tapestries each year for use as diplomatic gifts. Coural and Gastinel-Coural, *Beauvais*, 43.

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and perhaps also the size and ornamentation of the cases that housed them.[13] Just as the medium of tapestry was assumed to appeal to elites wherever they resided, the themes of aristocratic leisure featured in the *tenture chinoise* could well be imagined by Bertin as attractive to the distant, but equally, if not more, lavish Qing court. At the same time, Qianlong's reception of the tapestries suggests that the terms of this mutual appreciation of artistic difference were primarily material and technological rather than representational. In diplomatic contexts, objects communicated not only through their imagery but also through the materials and ingenuity with which they were made.

The *tenture chinoise* is a gift that has much to tell us about the role of objects in early modern informal diplomacy, just as it offers an exceptional opportunity to nuance the interpretative frame of chinoiserie. As scholars have recently shown, conventional understandings of chinoiserie and its close cognate, turquerie, as frivolous or meaningless occlude more active strategies of appropriation and more sustained, if ambivalent, engagements with the cultures that informed them.[14] Bertin's selection of the Beauvais tapestries as a gift for the Qianlong emperor suggests that however fantastical and varied in its meanings, chinoiserie also served as a vehicle of elite identification with, rather than a denigration of, Chinese difference.

The Emissaries: Ko and Yang

The meanings of the French tapestry gift can only be understood by looking closely at the goals of the mission and its agents, Ko, Yang and Bertin. Ko and

13 We know little about the actual accouterments and protocols of the presentation of tapestries in early modern diplomatic exchange, but see the sixteenth-century drawing of the unfurling of a tapestry gift before its princely recipient reproduced and discussed in Brassat, *Tapisserien*, 89-90. In his report on the Portuguese embassy to Beijing in 1753, Pierre-Antoine Lacere noted the Portuguese gifts to the emperor were housed in 29 "magnificently ornamented cases lined with velvet." One wonders if tapestries were presented in similarly ornamented boxes. Pierre-Antoine-Étienne Lacere, "Suite des nouvelles de missions, 1753," reprinted in A. M. Martins do Vale, "A embaixada enviada pelo rei Dom José I ao imperador Qianlong, em 1752, vista pelo procurador das missões estrangeiras de Paris em Macau," *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 5 (2004): 525, 527.

14 Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles"; Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, 2014); Avcioğlu, *'Turquerie'*; Mary D. Sheriff, "Introduction: Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art, 1492-1930," in *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration*, ed. Mary D. Sheriff (Chapel Hill, 2010), 1-16.

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Yang's application in 1764 for permission to travel home on a French East India company ship initiated one of the more remarkable episodes of early modern Sino-European cultural transfer. At the time of their request, Bertin was the minister in charge of the French India Company (he relinquished the post later that same year). He was also an avowed Sinophile with a keen sense of Chinese excellence in matters ranging from political economy to ceramics; his meeting with Ko and Yang presented him with an opportunity not to be missed.

In the eighteenth century, interpersonal encounters between Chinese and Europeans were rare. With the exception of Catholic missionaries and merchants who ventured to Asia and the few Chinese who traveled to Europe, Sino-European encounters in this period were mediated less by people than by imported goods. The French, like several other European powers, were allowed to trade in Canton (present-day Guangzhou), from 1757 the only port open to European trade, but France had no official diplomatic relations with China. By imperial favor, a small community of European missionaries was allowed to reside in Beijing, but other foreigners were restricted to Canton, and they were forbidden from fraternizing with local residents other than trade officials. Information on China was thus tightly controlled. As Chinese, however, Ko and Yang could (theoretically) travel within their home country and converse directly with its inhabitants. Speaking both French and Chinese and familiar with cultural practices both in France and in China, the two priests were ideally suited to gather and convey Chinese knowledge to eager recipients in Paris. To prepare Ko and Yang for their new roles, Bertin delayed their return voyage by a year and arranged for them to take an ambitious study tour of French manufactures.

Ko and Yang had arrived in France in 1752 under the aegis of the French Jesuit mission in Beijing. They were among a number of converts sent by the Jesuits to their order's colleges in France as part of their plan to train an indigenous Chinese clergy.[15] Ko and Yang spent several years studying French, Latin, logic and theology at the Collège Henri IV in La Flèche in Brittany. By 1759 they had entered the Collège Louis le Grand and the Jesuit novitiate in Paris. Their destinies were suddenly altered, however, by the Parlement de Paris's decree against the Jesuits in August 1762—the prelude to the complete suppression of the Society of Jesus in France in 1764—which proscribed the order's admission of novices and closed their colleges. Bereft in a foreign country without resources or sponsors, the two Chinese ecclesiastics were brought to the attention of the

15 Camille de Rochemonteix, *Joseph Amiot et les derniers survivants de la Mission française à Pékin (1750-1795)* (Paris, 1915), 56-67.

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French administration and supplied with a pension of 750 *livres*.[16] When maritime trade resumed after the end of the Seven Years War, the recently ordained priests requested free passage on a French India Company vessel. According to Ko and Yang, this is how they came to Bertin's attention.[17]

After Bertin resigned from his position as controller general of finances in 1763, Louis XV created a special ministry for him, a position he held until 1780. Bertin's ministerial brief ranged from agriculture, waterways, and mining to oversight of the Sèvres porcelain factory and the silk industry and, for a few months, the *Compagnie des Indes*. Motivated by his official responsibilities and his personal interests, Bertin promptly arranged for Ko and Yang to tour such French luxury manufactories as Sèvres, the Savonnerie carpet and the Gobelins tapestry workshops and silk weaving establishments in Lyons. The priests also observed papermaking and the production of pins, visited foundries, enameling workshops and the *Imprimerie royale*, and were given lessons in electricity, which according to Bertin "is possibly the only subject unknown or little known to China."[18] To aid in the reports they were to send from China, Ko and Yang had to learn to draw. As Bertin put it, images were infinitely more instructive than verbal descriptions of textile looms, instruments or plants.[19] An ornament designer by the name of Pariset was assigned to be their drawing master, and they were given Chinese works on paper to copy. Presumably they were schooled in both western European and Chinese conventions of representation the better to report back on Chinese design and industry. Ko and Yang also learned to make prints; Bertin noted that after a few months they were capable of etching views of Chinese landscapes, a claim borne out by their extant printed copies after woodcuts from the *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu* (*Pictures of Tilling and Weaving*), first published in Beijing in 1696.[20] Beholden to the French crown for financial support and their passage home, Ko and Yang had little say in the delay of their return to China or their participation in the instructional program devised for them.

16 "Voyage et séjour par ordre du Roi de deux particuliers chinois, les sieurs Kô and Yang," 9, printed pamphlet bound in BI, Ms. 1520, f. 50-55. To my knowledge, this is the only extant copy of the pamphlet, and it is incomplete. Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois," 157.

17 "Voyage et séjour," 10.

18 Bernard-Maître "Deux chinois," 159-180, quote on 166.

19 "Préface," *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois* 1 (1776), iii.

20 Several drawings and prints by Ko and Yang, including their etched copies after the *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu*, are bound in BI, Ms. 1520, f. 8-13.

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Negotiating their new situation apparently required subterfuge. As part of their French study tour, Bertin required Ko and Yang to submit extensive written accounts to him of what they had seen and in which they compared their observations with what they knew of Chinese tastes and manufacturing. Their reports, which were likely intended for the minister and his administrators only, indicate the degree to which they dissimulated the fact that they had little to no knowledge of life at the imperial court in Beijing or of the Chinese manufactures in which Bertin was interested. Bertin described the seminarians as the children of literati, but other sources suggest they were from humbler backgrounds.[21] Either way, the future priests would never have encountered the Qing emperor much less entered his palaces. Nevertheless, reflecting on their visit to the Gobelins, the pride of France's luxury industry, Ko and Yang wrote confidently to Bertin: "two or three tapestries from [France] in the emperor's palace would perhaps give him more pleasure than all the magnificent thrones with which he ornaments his court. He will be surprised by the *éclat* of the colors and the beauty of their drawing. People and flowers are preferable to all other representations, but the people must be decent because the Chinese are very particular on this matter."[22]

Ko and Yang's report to Bertin on their tour of another of France's most important manufactories, the Sèvres porcelain factory, indicate that they repeated back to the minister what they had been told and presumably what they assumed he wanted to hear.[23] When they visited in 1764, potters at Sèvres still produced soft paste porcelain, not the desired hard paste produced by the Chinese, and the French king's ceramicists were thus very much in competition with their counterparts in China for European market share. Stroking Bertin's ego and feeding his ambitions for the factory he oversaw, Ko and Yang praised the taste of French ceramicists and lamented the lack of it among Chinese potters, particularly when it came to figures. The priests described Chinese figures as almost always grotesque and Chinese drawing as considerably lacking when compared to French models. In making these claims,

21 "Voyage et séjour," 2; cf. Bernard-Maître, "Deux Chinois," 154. The priests' reports are transcribed in Bernard-Maître's article.

22 Ko and Yang, "Remarques sur differents manufactures," BI, Ms. 1520, f. 41, cited in Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois," 161. There was substance to the priests' claims about decency. In 1670, two printed cottons brought by a Portuguese embassy to the Qing court were rejected because they depicted nude figures. John E. Wills, Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1984), 118.

23 Jacques Roi, S.J., "Visite en 1764 de deux chinois à la manufacture royale de Sèvres," *Cahiers de la céramique du verre et des arts du feu* 33 (1964): 30.

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Ko and Yang echoed, probably intentionally, the most common tropes of eighteenth-century European accounts of Chinese art. French commentators routinely castigated Chinese artists for their distorted and grotesque figures and their perceived inability to draw.[24] The entry on Chinese painting in the *Encyclopédie* is a representative example: "the only merit of their painting is a certain neatness and a certain taste for servile imitation . . . one notes neither genius, design, invention nor correctness."[25]

Bertin characterized the Sino-French relationship he hoped to initiate through Ko and Yang as for the good of humanity. As he stated in his formal instructions to the priests, "because all of the peoples of the universe have the same origins and are members of the same family, the distance that separates them should not make them forget that, as men and as brothers, they owe each other mutual aid."[26] That said, the line between disinterested exchange and industrial espionage was a fine one. Once in China, Ko and Yang were to gather intelligence on "those areas in which the Chinese excel," and send samples varying from seeds and medicinal herbs to kaolin, the essential ingredient of hard paste porcelain clay.[27] They did little to dispel Bertin's illusions about their access to intellectuals at home and their ability to fulfill his ambitions.

On February 1, 1765, the two priests set sail for China, bringing with them detailed questionnaires on topics ranging from canal building to political economy to porcelain. They also brought examples of the latest in French technological achievements. In addition to the *tenture chinoise*, the gifts they were to distribute comprised eighteen Sèvres porcelains including vases, potpourri and biscuit figures, a case of twelve "superb" mirrors, telescopes, a camera obscura, and various microscopes. The priests were also given a portable printing press with moveable type and a machine for generating static electricity, both of which Ko and Yang had been equipped by Bertin to explain to Chinese at home.[28] The two ecclesiastics each received the gift of an annual royal pension of 1200 *livres* and a gold watch.[29]

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24 Roi, "Visite," 30.

25 *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres* (Paris, 1751-65), s.v. "peinture chinoise."

26 Bertin to Ko and Yang, January 16, 1765, BI, Ms. 1521, f. 61r. With the exception of the opening paragraphs partially cited here, most of Bertin's instructions are reprinted in Henri Cordier, "Les Chinois de Turgot," in *Florilegium, ou recueil de travaux d'érudition dédiés à Monsieur le Marquis Melchior de Vogüé* (Paris, 1909), 155-157.

27 Bertin to Mathurin-Jacques Brisson, June 30, 1764, BI, Ms. 1521, f. 26, also cited in Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois," 165.

28 "Voyage et séjour," 11; Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois," 184; Roi, "Visite," 33.

29 Bernard-Maître, "Deux chinois," 184-185.

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The Tapestries

In the late 1730s or early 1740s, the Beauvais tapestry factory commissioned designs for the *tenture chinoise* from François Boucher. In 1742, he exhibited eight small preliminary paintings for the series in the Salon in Paris.[30] Shortly thereafter the artist Jean Joseph Dumons worked up six of Boucher's painted scenes into cartoons for the weavers at Beauvais; the first of the hangings was on the looms by 1743. Boucher and Dumons did not design the tapestries with their eventual imperial recipient in mind. Instead, the Chinese-themed pastorals catered to the tastes of such wealthy Europeans as the French financier Pierre-Onésyme Bergeret, and Don Felipe of Spain, who both purchased sets of the Chinese hangings, and count von Moltke, the Dane who received the *tenture chinoise* as a gift from Louis XV in 1759.[31] A complete set, such as was given to Qianlong, would have comprised *The Chinese Fair* (Fig. 1) as well as five other tapestries depicting *The Chinese Dance, Chinese Bird Hunting, Chinese Fishing, The Chinese Garden* and *The Chinese Meal*.[32] Given their scale, such tapestry cycles were necessarily hung in large rooms and fully covered their walls; they thus enveloped their viewers and invited their imaginative participation in the scenes represented. The version of *The Chinese Fair* sent to China measured an impressive 6.64 meters in width, and others of the set destined for the emperor ranged between 5.6 and 3.73 meters wide.[33] Each featured King Louis XV's coat of arms in the center of its upper border.

30 Boucher's oil paintings for the series are now in Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie in Besançon. All are reproduced in *François Boucher, 1703-1770*, exh. cat. (New York, 1986), 202-205.

31 Candace J. Adelson, *European Tapestry in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis, 1994), 333. These tapestries are frequently referred to as the second *tenture chinoise*. From c. 1688, the Beauvais factory produced a set of six tapestries, the first *tenture chinoise*, now known as the *Story of the Emperor of China*. The set depicted scenes from the life of the Shunzhi (1644-1661) and Kangxi (1662-1722) emperors including their interactions with Jesuit astronomers in Beijing. By 1731, the cartoons for the first set were too damaged for use. As scholars have suggested, Boucher's designs were likely commissioned to replace and update them. On the earlier series, see Charissa Bremer-David, *French Tapestries and Textiles in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles, 1997), 80-97.

32 Photographs of extant versions of the series are difficult to come by. Versions of *The Chinese Fair, Chinese Fishing*, and *The Chinese Dance*, are reproduced in Adelson, *European Tapestry*, 324-25, 330-32. A version of *The Chinese Garden* is reproduced in *François Boucher, 1703-1770*, 342.

33 Adelson, *European Tapestry*, 332; Bertrand, "La seconde 'Tenture chinoise'," 182, n. 33.

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For European elites, the elegant, slightly sinicized figures and luxurious settings of the *tenture chinoise* encouraged a projection into a China both arcadian and courtly. Jesuit reports from Beijing and the more material allure of Asian imports such as silks, porcelains and lacquers conjured visions of a sophisticated, splendid court culture with which they could vicariously identify. At the same time, the idea of China conveyed through objects and texts lent itself to artistic license. *The Chinese Fair*, for instance, presents a vision of Asian material plenitude including textiles, lacquer cabinets and fans, but also, and rather incongruously, near Eastern carpets, and blue and white porcelain set in European metal mounts. The tapestry also features a charlatan, a figure familiar from depictions of European fairs, palm trees, camels and many magnificently attired noble women attended by servants, one of whom is African. That this tapestry series was as much about Europeans as it was about China is revealed most clearly in the blond hair sported by the "Chinese" noblewomen in each of the tapestries. All of the figures in Boucher's preliminary designs have black hair; perhaps the change in color, and the consequent subduing of difference, was made to make the images more inviting to imaginative identification by courtly European consumers.

At the same time, Boucher's images are not entirely fictional. As scholars have shown, the artist based details of his designs on representations of Asia in travel accounts as well as Chinese objects and images available in Paris. *The Chinese Dance*, for example, features multiple accurate renderings of Chinese instruments, an element that suggests a wider availability of, and interest in, Asian objects in early eighteenth-century France than is sometimes assumed.[34] The most obvious borrowing in *The Chinese Fair* is the woman in a rickshaw at center, a motif based on an illustration from Arnoldus Montanus's seventeenth-century account of a Dutch embassy to Japan published in 1669.[35] The "Chinese" elements in the tapestries include the woven frames of tightly curled, rather spiky "parsley leaves" used only for this series.[36] Boucher was an avid collector of Chinese objects, including instruments, and he likely read

34 Véronique Brient, "L'impact de l'Empire du Milieu sur les arts au XVIII[e] siècle en Europe," in *Regards croisés: Chine-France*, ed. Laurine Quetin and Jean-Jacques Tatin-Gourier (Tours, 2009), 49; on Boucher's borrowings from Asian sources see Perrin Stein, "Boucher's Chinoiseries: Some New Sources," *Burlington Magazine* 138 (1996): 598-604, and Perrin Stein, "Les chinoiseries de Boucher et leur sources: l'art de l'appropriation," in Georges Brunel et al., *Pagodes et dragons: exotisme et fantaisie dans l'Europe rococo, 1720-1770* (Paris, 2007), 86-100.

35 Stein, "Boucher's Chinoiseries," 600, n. 15.

36 Adelson, *European Tapestry*, 331. As Adelson has pointed out, this frame design may have been inspired by one of the borders used for the first *tenture chinoise*.

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parts of the illustrated texts he consulted. For his part, Bertin was almost certainly familiar with Jesuit descriptions of the court in Beijing, and these may have guided his decision to send the *tenture chinoise*. The *Chinese Fair*, for instance, is strikingly consistent with missionary accounts of shopping events arranged for the emperor and the women of his court. A widely circulated letter by the Jesuit Jean-Denis Attiret published in France in 1749, and thus after Boucher and Dumons had completed their designs, described the emperor and his ladies' extensive and expensive purchases at an apparently raucous make-believe shopping street or *maimaijie* in the gardens at Yuanming Yuan.[37] Such first-hand descriptions may have convinced Bertin that the tapestries were an appropriate gift for a ruler understood to divide his time between a leisured life outdoors and palaces whose splendors were said to rival Versailles.

The Meanings of the Gift

Ko and Yang arrived in Canton by November 1765, but their homecoming did not go as planned. The two priests were immediately confronted with the social proscriptions of a land they had left as teenagers, proscriptions that would make their promised research for Bertin difficult and its accompanying gift distribution impossible. Among the presents they brought, the tapestries in particular aroused unwelcome attention from the viceroy of Canton who vehemently insisted on acquiring them for himself. It was established practice that high-ranking Qing trade officials could select imports attractive to them, often for dispatch to Beijing, from among the objects found on European ships during inspections.[38] The viceroy likely had other reasons for wanting to seize the *tenture chinoise*. He or his administrators had apparently failed to communicate the emperor's earlier imperial commission for European tapestries to foreign traders in Canton. When Qianlong finally received the *tenture chinoise*,

37 *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des jésuites de Chine, 1702-1776*, ed. Isabelle et Jean-Louis Vissière (Paris, 2001), 236-37. On the shopping streets constructed for the Qing emperors see Geremie R. Barmé, "The Garden of Perfect Brightness: A Life in Ruins," *East Asian History* 11 (1996): 119-120.

38 Cranmer-Byng and Wills, Jr., "Trade and Diplomacy," 227-228; Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong, 2007), 25; Laura Newby, "Copper Plates for the Qianlong Emperor: From Paris to Peking via Canton," *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012): 188-189.

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his officials wondered why the dimensions of the tapestries differed from those requested by the emperor a few years before.[39]

Because of Qing restrictions on exchange with foreigners, and on subjects traveling outside China, the identities of the tapestries' owners could not be revealed without serious consequences for the French India Company and the priests. Ko himself recognized that he and Yang had not fully understood that the kind of interpersonal contact Bertin envisioned for them in China was impossible: "It is not as easy as to talk to people here as one thinks in Europe and as we ourselves believed when we were in France. In this country, individuals cannot move beyond their station in life without somebody asking who they are and the reasons and goals of their inquiries."[40] In another letter, Ko urged Bertin not to send them any more lavish gifts; such presents were dangerous evidence of their contact with foreigners.[41] Beyond this passage, Ko never alluded to the full extent of the challenges he and Yang faced, but Michel Benoist, the Jesuit who had initially educated the priests in Beijing, was far blunter. In a letter to Bertin, written in 1766, Benoist made clear that they could never hope to present the tapestries to the emperor, and he urged Bertin to realize that his project for Ko and Yang put their lives and the lives of those who helped them at risk. Ko and Yang had already contravened the emperor's ban on Chinese travel abroad, they had taken on French ideas and manners, and they were Christian, all of which made them deeply suspect.[42] Yang would later be imprisoned in 1787 for his missionary activities.[43] The prohibition on Chinese fraternization with foreigners was also a serious one. Benoist cited the example of James Flint, a British East India Company employee who was jailed for three years in 1759 for having left Canton and traveled up the coast to Tianjin. He was merely imprisoned, but his Chinese accomplices were beheaded. A similar fate lay in store for the Chinese priests if they were caught assisting the French.[44]

A rather delicate negotiation over the tapestries ensued between French India Company representatives in Canton, in whose warehouse the tapestries were kept, Chinese trade officials in the same city, now under suspicion

39 Michel Benoist to Henri-Léonard Bertin, Beijing, October 12, 1766, and November 10, 1767, reprinted in Henri Cordier, "Les correspondants de Bertin, Secrétaire d'État au XVIII[e] siècle," *T'oung Pao*, second series, 18, 4/5 (1917): 295-318, here 303-304, 306, 324.

40 Ko to Bertin, September 29, 1766, BI, Ms. 1520, f. 162v-163r.

41 Ko to Bertin, Beijing, October 10, 1767, BI, Ms. 1520, f. 180r.

42 Benoist to Bertin, Beijing, October 12, 1766, in Cordier, "Les correspondants," 295-301.

43 Pfister, *Notices*, 922.

44 Benoist to Bertin, Beijing, October 12, 1766, in Cordier, "Les correspondants," 297.

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by the viceroy for blocking his acquisition of the hangings, and Bertin in Paris. In the end, the French agreed, with some reluctance on the part of Bertin and the priests, that the only way out of the impasse was to have the French Jesuits in Beijing present the tapestries to Qianlong as a gift from their order. This change in plan required the Jesuits to solicit the emperor's permission to bring the *tenture chinoise* to Beijing. This request necessitated intricate maneuvers as the Jesuits in the capital were officially prohibited any contact with Canton and should not have known the tapestries were there. (One outcome of these negotiations was the emperor's lifting of his ban on direct correspondence between Europeans in Beijing and in Canton.) The *tenture chinoise* was finally presented to Qianlong in December 1766 not by Ko and Yang, whose social position utterly precluded such an action, but by a high ranking Chinese official on behalf of the French Jesuits at court who had taken Ko and Yang into his care and taken charge of the distribution of their gifts.

The splendid offering of the tapestries now ostensibly by the Jesuits had the advantage of obligating them to Bertin and the French crown, and what Ko and Yang could not easily do for Bertin, the Jesuits, with their privileged access to the emperor and members of his court, subsequently did. A truly remarkable exchange of books, drawings and objects ensued between the French mission in the imperial capital and Bertin well after the Jesuits had been suppressed worldwide in 1773 and Bertin had left office in 1780.[45] This exchange is only now being investigated, but the nature of some of the gifts, which included imperial porcelain and a catalogue of the imperial collection of bronzes, suggests it occurred with the tacit permission of the emperor.[46] Ko and Yang continued to forward information to Bertin when their circumstances permitted. In Europe, the most lasting legacy of Bertin's encounter with Ko and Yang was the *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois*, a fifteen-volume book published in Paris from 1776-1791 and almost entirely based on letters and reports sent by the Jesuits to Bertin from Beijing after the priests' return. This publication remained the authoritative source on China well into the nineteenth century.

45 For an overview, see Constance Bienaimé and Patrick Michel, "Portrait du singulier monsieur Bertin, ministre investi dans les affaires de la Chine," in *La Chine à Versailles. Art et diplomatie au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Marie-Laure de Rochebrune (Paris, 2014), 151-157, and several of the catalogue entries in the same book.

46 For a study of one of these gifts, see Kee Il Choi Jr., "Father Amiot's Cup: A Qing Imperial Porcelain sent to the Court of Louis XVI," in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London, 2015), 33-41.

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Bertin expected the Jesuits to "turn the occasion [of the gift of the tapestries] to the advantage of the French and their trade by securing the favor of the emperor towards them and above all to distinguish them from all other European nations."[47] He was particularly insistent that the tapestries not be understood as an official gift from the French crown; they were intended as a means to ascertain the emperor's interest in "our manufactures and our arts."[48] Bertin's concern that the gift might wrongly be interpreted as tribute, that is as conveying a message of submission to the emperor, is suggested by his response to the news, relayed to him in passing by Yang, that the Portuguese had given a set of tapestries to Qianlong in 1753 during their embassy on behalf of the Portuguese Jesuits in China. According to Yang, courtiers had compared the *tenture chinoise* to the hangings given by the king of Portugal and concluded that "the ugliness of the latter heightened the beauty of the former."[49] Bertin wondered how the ambassador could have presented the tapestries without having them understood as tribute, and presumably, how the Portuguese could reconcile themselves to the perception of their embassy as one of submission to the emperor.[50] According to a report filed on the Portuguese diplomatic mission by the procurator of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris in Macao, Pierre-Antoine-Étienne Lacere, the embassy was in fact understood as such, and it was a serious point of contention between the Portuguese ambassador, Francesco de Assis Pachecho de Sampaio, and officials representing the emperor. Qing documents indicate that considerable accommodations were made for the Portuguese that were not extended to a concurrent embassy from Siam, and Lacere's account confirms the degree to which the emperor accorded special favor to the Portuguese ambassador through his personal presentation of gifts and an invitation to attend the Dragon Boat Festival at Yuanming Yuan.[51] For the Portuguese, however, at least as reported by Lacere, the honor of their king was affronted more than once by promises made and broken by Qing officials with regard to precedence and the issue of tribute.[52] Despite

47 Bertin to Poivre, Versailles, December 31, 1766, BI, Ms. 1521, f. 88v.

48 Bertin to Ko and Yang, December 31, 1766, BI, Ms. 1521, f. 10r. When Bertin contemplated a second gift of tapestries to the emperor, this time from the Gobelins manufactory, he drafted a similar directive: the gift "ne doit être offert qu'au nom des missionnaires, sans y intéresser en quelque manière celui de la Nation et à plus forte raison celui du Roi." Bertin to François Bourgeois, n.d. [1779], BI, Ms. 1523, f. 45v-46r.

49 Yang to Bertin, December 29, 1767, BI, Ms. 1520, f. 167v-168r.

50 Bertin to Ko and Yang, Versailles, January 27, 1769, BI, Ms. 1521, f. 99r.

51 Lo-Shu Fu, *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations (1644-1820)* (Tucson, 1966), vol. 1: 190. See also Cranmer-Byng and Wills, Jr., "Trade and Diplomacy," 226.

52 Lacere, "Suite," in Vale, "A embaixada," 520-525.

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the emperor's flexibility in diplomatic protocol, his representatives read and recorded the visit and the gifts, including the tapestries, as tribute. From the French perspective, the Portuguese embassy illustrated the considerable risks of a formal mission to Beijing.[53] Over the course of his work as a translator for the emperor during the Portuguese embassy, the French Jesuit Antoine Gaubil learned that Qianlong desired an official visit from France. Gaubil wrote privately: "I do not think that the French court, having been instructed about the court in Beijing, would ever wish to send an ambassador here."[54]

Our knowledge of Qianlong's reception of the *tenture chinoise* is doubly mediated, first by the official who reported back to the Jesuits, and then by Benoist who wrote an account of the gift's presentation for Bertin in 1767.[55] According to Benoist, upon seeing the tapestries, the emperor was "seized with admiration." Qianlong had them presented to him from different points of view, and after closely examining the "finesse of their workmanship" he admired them even more. Benoist further reported that the emperor first thought to use them to decorate one of the temples in his palace, as "temples are where one places the most precious things one has." Realizing, however, that the Jesuits would be "mortified" by this use of their offering, Qianlong then determined to find a place for the tapestries in one of his European palaces at Yuanming Yuan. As there were no rooms large enough for them, the emperor gave the order to build a new palace with spaces proportionate to the scale of the tapestries. Work was to begin in 1768.[56]

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53 As James Hevia has noted, Qing officials used the Portuguese embassy of 1753 as a model for the protocol to be observed during the Macartney mission in 1793. Hevia, *Cherishing Men*, 139, 151, 170-171.

54 Antoine Gaubil to Joseph-Nicolas Delisle, Peking, October 25, 1753, in Antoine Gaubil, *Correspondance de Pékin, 1722-1759*, ed. Renée Simon (Geneva, 1970), 761. Bertin also wanted to know what the tapestries bestowed by the Portuguese looked like. Yang could not answer, but according to Lacere, the Portuguese brought nine tapestries from the Gobelins factory, and the hangings had been placed in one of the European palaces at Yuanming Yuan. Bertin to Ko and Yang, Versailles, January 27, 1769, BI, Ms. 1521 f. 99r; Lacere, "Suite," in Vale, "A embaixada," 527.

55 Mei Mei Rado's research in the Qing court archives may yield documentation of the emperor's official response to the Beauvais tapestries. See n. 58 below.

56 Benoist to Bertin, November 10, 1767, in Cordier, "Les correspondants," 322. There is a discrepancy in the archives regarding the date of the pavilion's construction. A document dated 1782-83 in the Yuanming Yuan archives describes it as newly built. See Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, "Europeomania at the Chinese Court: The Palace of the Delights of Harmony (1747-1751), Architecture, and Interior Decoration," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 65 (2000): 58, n. 23.

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This was a remarkable gesture of imperial favor, one perhaps tacitly directed to Louis XV on whose behalf it was suspected the tapestries had been presented. Court officials repeatedly questioned Benoist about the gift and whether it came from his king.[57] A less prominent gesture of appreciation was the emperor's command that his weavers produce woven silk tapestries or *kesi* in emulation of the *tenture chinoise* (Fig. 3). One of two extant versions of these Chinese "western tapestries," as they were called in Qing documents, is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art.[58] Measuring over 2.4 × 3.7 meters and representing a *Family Gathering on New Year's Morning*, the Chinese tapestry resembles the Beauvais series in its shape and scale and its perspectival depiction of a multi-figure genre subject. Unusually, this Chinese interpretation was woven in silk and wool—*kesi* were conventionally made of pure silk—suggesting that emulation of the French tapestry extended to its materials.[59] A more overt borrowing is the distinctive border based on the specially designed woven frame for Boucher's designs.

Like the *kesi*, the building constructed for the *tenture chinoise*, the Observatory of Distant Oceans, merged Chinese and European forms and techniques (Fig. 2). While the tiled and hipped roofs of the Observatory were recognizably Chinese, the carved stone ornament and the façade, with its columns, engaged piers and paned oculi, was European in inspiration. It was one of several stone European pavilions or palaces designed by the Jesuits, Benoist among them, and erected in a far corner of Yuanming Yuan. Like the others it was filled with European objects and machines. Largely destroyed when they were looted in 1860, the palaces are known today through a set of twenty copperplate engravings commissioned by Qianlong from the Manchu artist Ilantai in 1783-86.[60] The prints and the buildings they depict have been the subject of

57 Benoist to Bertin, November 10, 1767, in Cordier, "Les correspondants," 324-325.

58 The Cleveland *kesi* was published in 1914, but Mei Mei Rado has recently located a second version in the Palace Museum in Beijing. Her research in the Qing archives has shown that these *kesi* were designated "western tapestries." Rado's several archival discoveries regarding the *kesi* and her innovative interpretations of their imagery are part of her dissertation in progress, "*Xiyang* Textiles in the Eighteenth-Century Qing Imperial Court: Fabrication, Display, and Representation of the West," Bard Graduate Center, New York. The Cleveland *kesi* is briefly discussed and reproduced in color in "A Chinese Tapestry," Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs 25 (1914): 230-231.

59 On *kesi* silk tapestry weaving see *Chinese Silks*, ed. Dieter Kuhn (New Haven, London and Beijing, 2012), 460-468, on Qing period *kesi* with wool, see 464.

60 For the pavilions and the prints see, among others, Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle and London, 2015), 179-218, and Richard E. Strassberg, "War and Peace: Four Intercultural Landscapes," in *China on*

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FIGURE 3 *Family Gathering on New Year's Morning*, China, Qing dynasty, c. 1770, tapestry weave: silk and wool, 257.1 × 376 cm.
THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART, BEQUEST OF JOHN L. SEVERANCE 1942.825.

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much recent scholarly inquiry; I will only emphasize, as other art historians have, that the mix of Chinese and European elements in the palaces, as in the prints, parallels the contemporaneous European phenomenon of chinoiserie. Like chinoiserie, such cultural productions suggest the appropriation of forms and technologies could register a recognition of equivalence, at least among elites and despite considerable cultural differences.[61]

Like several art historians before me, I have emphasized the subjects of the *tenture chinoise*. Yet in so far as one can trust the account of Qianlong's viewing of the tapestries, the emperor seems to have focused his attention on their material qualities rather than the scenes they represented. One presumes, for example, that it was their magnificence rather than their themes that made them appropriate for a temple. In this sense Qianlong responded to the technological achievements represented by the tapestries, and to the visual and tactile qualities of objects that modern historians' emphasis on figural representations has tended to obscure. It is telling that in eighteenth-century inter-European diplomatic gift exchange, paintings (with the exception of portraits) seem to have been a comparably uncommon gift. Preferable were jeweled items, porcelains and tapestries, opulent things made of sensuously appealing materials and exhibiting an excellence of craftsmanship that could communicate across geographical and cultural distance while also, as Bertin wished, activating a desire for more.[62] A similar emphasis on material appreciation characterizes European admiration for the Chinese lacquers, porcelains and silks imported in increasing numbers in the eighteenth century and prominently foregrounded in the *tenture chinoise*.

My aim is not to deny the elements of fantasy, misunderstanding or hostility in European responses to China, nor do I mean to downplay the role of the foreign in shoring up symbolic mastery at home. The latter was one of the functions of the Qianlong emperor's European pavilions at Yuanming Yuan just as it was of the various Chinese structures in European princely gardens.[63] What the gift of the tapestries suggests, however, is the insufficiency of an interpretative model like chinoiserie. For despite their acknowledgment of the appeal of

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Paper: European and Chinese works from the Late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century, ed. Marcia Reed and Paola Demattè (Los Angeles, 2007), 104-120. The Jesuits sent a set of the engravings to Bertin, see Strassberg, "War and Peace," 120, and BI, Ms. 1524, f. 192-193.

61 Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles," 138.

62 They were also valuable things. In Europe, jeweled items such as snuffboxes and portrait miniatures were often sold after an embassy was concluded.

63 Strassberg, "War and Peace," 106-109; Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles;" Avcioğlu, *'Turquerie.'*

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materials like porcelain and lacquer, many scholars focus on figuration at the expense of surface. Left out of such analyses is the potential of materials and technologies—of intricately woven fibers, ornamental borders and textured, lustrous colored surfaces—to signify in themselves and to facilitate engagements with the achievements of others despite the absence of shared representational systems.[64]

The gift of the *tenture chinoise* also suggests how objects mediated early modern diplomatic exchange by conveying messages that could not be communicated or recorded in official records. As Benoist reported to Bertin, "the emperor is aware of the independence of European sovereigns and always speaks of them with the consideration and respect due to one's equals, but his tribunals will not change their old traditions. They record every gift to the emperor from whichever sovereign and under whatever circumstance as tribute."[65] As historians have shown, these records led in large part to modern interpretations of Qing diplomacy as governed by a rigid "tribute system," a conceptualization now vigorously challenged and historically belied by the Qianlong emperor's actions.[66] If the Portuguese in 1753 were willing to risk precedence in the name of religion, for the French, the perception of bearing tribute to Qianlong was unthinkable. Bound by incompatible systems of international relations, neither the French king nor the Qianlong emperor could officially acknowledge the other as equal. Recognition was thus proffered in other ways: through the exchange of objects and expertise and by grander gestures such as the building of a palace in response to an unofficial gift. Objects thus not only occasioned admiration (whether genuine or politely feigned) for the technology and material splendors of one's distant equals, but as the gift of the *tenture chinoise* suggests, they could also serve as a vital means of international diplomacy when officially there could be none.

64 On the communicative potentialities of surface, see Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, 2010).

65 Benoist to Bertin, Beijing, November 10, 1767, in Cordier, "Les correspondants," 323-324.

66 John E. Wills, Jr., "Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas about Mid-Qing Dynasty Foreign Relations," *American Neptune* 48 (1988): 225; Hevia, *Cherishing Men*, 9-15; Cranmer-Byng and Wills, Jr., "Trade and Diplomacy."

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